



La Belle et la Bête

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Magic, Retold Fairy Tales, Romance

Once upon a time, in the richest lands of kings and queens, was a palace rife with jubilation and celebration.

The Princess Adelaide had turned eighteen and inherited the throne of the late Queen after four years waiting for her to come of age.

The kingdom rejoiced.

A ball was thrown in honour of the Princess so that she might hope to find a husband and become Queen.

Every eligible nobleman across the country was invited and took their turn to dance with her across the floor.

When it neared the end of the night, the Princess was frustrated. No man seemed perfect.

As she broke apart from her dance partner and approached the stage to declare the evening over, the doors were flung open.

Every candle flickered out.

Every guest turned their head.

A young man strode through the crowd of guests, black coat tails fluttering behind him and a tilt to his lips.

“Your highness,” he greeted, sweeping into a bow and grasping her hand. “I am the last bachelor of the land to have not danced with you.”

The Princess blinked in surprise.

The pair’s dance ended shortly and the stranger knelt to take her hand and offered to wed her.

Gasping, the Princess refused his swift proposal.

The stranger grew angry at her rejection, leaping to his feet. His long black cloak curled around his body and he morphed into the form of a sorcerer with furious stygian eyes. A splintered staff of mahogany slid into his

hand and glowed malachite green. “You are vain, Princess,” he snarled, swiping his staff through the air as she stumbled backwards, “you think I am not worthy of you? You shall learn your true place!” With this, he lay a curse on the Princess.

Bolts of malachite lightning coiled around her form, wrenching at her limbs and blistering her skin; fur grew in chunks from her pores, thick ebony strands, it covered her body in a shivering mass as it began to grow. Snapping bones and groaning tendons echoed through the great hall as her skeleton was remoulded into a hulking hunch looming over the sorcerer and wailing in roars of pain. She tossed her head back and clawed at her skull with sharpened yellow talons as two obsidian horns curled out of her head, eliciting a tortured scream. The sorcerer turned the Princess into a hideous beast and cast a powerful charm over the castle and promised that, unless she find someone to love her, she would die a beast.

The eyes of a beast snapped open: the red of spilt blood and crushed garnet.

There was an old inventor—Marite. She lived with her daughters in poverty.

Once, her husband had been a great merchant with ships full of treasure and wealth. They had three sons and three daughters who lived happily.

Until their house was burned down in a fire that claimed everything they owned: silver, gold, furniture, pictures and books. Then, one by one, his ships were destroyed—by fire, pirates or storm. Her husband lost everything. They were forced to move into a cottage hidden among the woods. The three sons worked the field while the three daughters were forced to fill the roles their servants had once held. Soon, Marite’s husband fell ill with plague. He died shortly after and the three sons left the squalor of the cottage to find their own lives before councilmen came to take the property. Two of the sisters were bitter and filled with anger at the downturn of their wealth, they blamed their mother and their brothers and their father but most of all, they blamed the third sister.

She was the youngest, scarcely fourteen, but the most intelligent and most caring of them all.

She was born another name but her parents called her Belle.

Beauty.

Where her siblings had grown callous and pinched with extravagance, Belle had grown kinder and softer. Her eyes were radiant with the birch silver of her mother’s and her cheeks were round with the easiness of her smile.

In the years after their father's death, the women found home in the room of a village inn and Marite found solace in fixing the blackened wreckage of their first house. Finally, Marite forgot about fixing broken things altogether and created wondrous inventions from nothing at all.

Jogging out of her bedroom, Belle swiped the basket from the counter and waved goodbye to her mother. "I'm going to fetch the bread!" she called, leaving her Ma to chuckle behind goggles, hammering two slots of wood together to create a base for her miniature windmill.

Belle hurtled down the stairs and out of the inn, waving to the innkeeper behind his desk.

She skipped out into the street and towards the baker's.

The hustle and bustle of the tiny village thrilled her and she grinned, weaving between the crowds of villagers going about their morning routine. Occasionally, she would catch a mutter of, "shouldn't trust that one," or "her mother, you know." Sometimes, they would even hiss, "witch," under their breath as she passed them. They didn't trust the woman who could create fantastic inventions from scraps of wood.

Her Ma assured her it wasn't something to worry about. The witch trials didn't happen here. Not in such a small town. They happened in the North, where there had once been queens on the throne.

Belle slid into the baker's shop and smiled at the man behind the counter.

He spotted her and brushed his hands down on his apron. "Belle," he greeted, ducking behind the shelf to pull out her usual half-loaf and handed it over to her.

"Good morning, Baker," she replied, passing him the money and tucking the loaf into her basket. She thanked him and bounced out of the door into the village square.

She crossed the square towards the lumber yard. There was usually a pile of scrap wood left in the corner that would be sold for firewood at the market. Belle leaned across the fence and gathered an armful of the wood before turning back towards the village centre and jumped backwards when Gaston appeared in front of her. "Belle," he cried, "what a darling day it is. What have you there?"

Belle hid the stolen wood in her basket and replied, "A loaf of bread, Monsieur."

She sidestepped the man but he grabbed her arm and demanded:

"Why run from me, Mademoiselle? Marry me and I can take your mother and sisters out of poverty. Marry me and you can be wealthy."

Belle declined again and ducked behind a passing carriage so that Gaston could not easily follow her. As she did, Belle glanced across the square and dropped her basket in shock.

There was a procession of men in short red cloaks with tall hats and curling white wigs. Behind them was a carriage being trundled along. At first, Belle couldn't see the carriage but she moved through the crowd and could suddenly make out the unmistakable wooden stake bars caging a ragged woman inside.

Around her, there were hushed mumbles. The same word was being repeated between the villagers: "Witch."

Belle fled the square to the inn and raced upstairs to her mother.

"Ma! Ma!" she cried as she burst into the room.

Her mother startled and rushed to soothe Belle. "My dear," she begged, "what has happened?"

Belle's sisters hurried out of their room at the noise—they seldom left the house. The two sisters were bitter with how quickly Belle had adjusted to their new life and how carelessly Marite ignored the whispers of the villagers. They had turned eighteen three and four years before Belle had, unable to work and unable to pay a dowry, they were trapped in the room above an inn with nothing but resentment for the world around them. Glowering, the elder sister repeated her mother and asked Belle the same.

Catching her breath, Belle recounted the procession of men with their caged woman.

Marite shuddered and stumbled out of the room.

Belle and her sisters could hear slamming and rushing. When Marite appeared again, she had a packed trunk with her.

"They're witch hunters," she told the sisters, "and they have come for women like me. I need to leave until they have gone." At first, her daughters protested but Marite assured them that it shouldn't be long before she returned. "Until then, you must answer no questions about my whereabouts. Tell them I have left to visit the grave of your father."

The older sisters persisted in their argument, going so far as to grab hold of their mother's trunk. "You cannot leave us!" they screamed. "We have nothing here. We have bread and water. Without the money from your inventions, how will we afford even that?"

Their mother smiled sadly and kissed each of their foreheads. "I shall bring you back each a gift," she promised. "Where I am going, hopefully I can discover a way to our former wealth. A rich husband or a merchant to trade my inventions. I will return with gifts for you. What shall you have?"

Instantly, the two older sisters beamed and rattled off excited desires for luxurious dresses and jewellery, tired of the ragged linen dresses they wore.

Marite turned to Belle. “And you? Belle?”

“Nothing, Ma,” Belle replied, “I wish only for you to return home safely.”

This vexed her sisters who accused her of blaming them for wanting such expensive gifts. It pleased her mother, however, who was proud of her youngest daughter’s selflessness. But she worried that Belle deserved something—a beautiful girl of eighteen deserved beautiful things. Marite told her to choose something.

“Ma, if you insist,” Belle sighed, “I ask for a rose. It’s been so long since we kept flowers in here, I feel it would bring more life into our home.”

Marite smiled and agreed. Then, she left and mounted the innkeeper’s horse, galloping out of the village and into the forest.

Marite rode the horse through the dense forest, heading for the cottage where her husband was buried.

However, too soon the sky was darkening and snow was falling in flurries. Once it became too dark to see the path, she was forced to halt the horse and stop for the night. Since leaving the village, she had seen no sign of civilisation and could find only a hollow tree to take shelter as the snow became heavy and thick.

She fell asleep curled in her cloak inside the tree.

Wolf howls woke her.

Awake, Marite could hear the snarls of wolves nearby and dived out of the tree to leap on to the horse.

Snapping the reins, she clung on as the horse bolted ahead, spooked by the howls behind them.

There was a snapping by her foot and Marite saw a beige-coated wolf hurl itself at the horse and she kicked at it, shouting at the horse to move faster. It thundered down a snowy path—every path too deep in snow to recognise.

And then—a towering palace appeared beyond the treeline and Marite felt relief wash over her. She tilted the reins towards a gap in the trees and they landed on a path through shadowed gardens. The wolves were snarling at her ankles as Marite’s horse sprinted towards the hulking turrets of the palace. It had cantered up the stone case of stairs when Marite noticed the wolves had stopped. They were lowered to the ground, bellies scraping the floor and tails tucked between their legs; with a whimper, they spun around and chased back the way they had come.

Marite panted, shakily climbing down from her horse and leading it around the castle. She called out as she trailed the outside of the grand palace, searching for any sign of life. She led the horse into a stable and covered it over with a blanket, feeding it the hay from the floor.

Returning to the vast doors, Marite entered the grand palace and trudged past several splendid rooms of incredible luxury and wealth. She imagined everything in the palace was hers and wished that she could spend time dividing the precious items between her daughters and give them everything they had wished for. She discovered a room lit by a roaring fireplace and rushed in to warm herself. Soon, she felt drowsy and fell quickly asleep.

When she woke, there was a tray of food on the table by her feet. She ate ravenously and fell asleep once more. The second time she woke, a tray of cakes and pastries had appeared on the table and she ate these with the same vigour. But she wasn't drowsy with cold and weariness anymore. She stood and left the room, calling out as she wandered the castle and hoping to find a servant or her host. Alas, as far as she could see, having explored up and down the castle, she was alone.

Marite didn't know how long she had stayed at the palace and she was anxious to get home and see her daughters.

She left through the same vast doors she had entered by, tracing the edge of the castle once more to find the stables. Untying the horse from the stable post, Marite guided it out of the stables and around the castle where she stopped and paused. A beautiful rose bush grew across the garden wall, vines intricately lacing together and wine-red roses blooming through the lush green. Remembering her promise, Marite gathered one in her hand for Belle.

The moment the stem snapped from the bush, there was a frightful noise behind her.

Startled, she spun around and dropped the flower. Before her, towered a monstrous beast. Its fur was darker than raven feathers, great yellowed tusks protruded from its mouth, gnarled horns curled from its head and crimson shone from its eyes like poisoned rose petals. When it spoke, its jaw was lined with sharpened fangs and a black forked tongue that licked each word it spat:

"I have treated you with kindness! Fed you, warmed you and given you a place to sleep. Is this how you show your gratitude? Running from me and stealing my roses! Your insolence will not be forgotten."

"Please!" Marite begged, terrified by the beast's fury. "Please, I am grateful for all you have given me and had no intention of proving myself otherwise. I only thought that you wouldn't be offended by so little as a rose."

The beast roared. "Save your flattery and excuses. They will not save you from the punishment you deserve. To steal from me? I, who offered you so much."

In despair, Marite told the beast of her misfortune since her home burned to ash. She told the beast of her

daughters. She told the beast of Belle's request for the rose and begged for forgiveness.

For a moment, the beast considered. "Go home. Bring back one of your daughters. She will stay here and you may live."

"No!" Marite cried. "I could never leave a daughter of mine here."

"It is not your worries that matter," the beast snarled, "any of your daughters that comes here must come willingly or not at all. Go home and see which one will sacrifice her life for yours. Should none of them, then you will return and stay here."

"In the room beside the one in which you ate, there are two cases. Pack them both with anything you desire from there and come back here. You will find a horse. Exactly one month and, unless you return with one of your daughters, I will find you and drag you back here, myself." With that, the beast disappeared into the castle and Marite was left to hurry out of the courtyard and into the room.

She found the two trunks there. Searching the room, Marite found luxurious gowns fit for queens in the wardrobe; necklaces, earrings and bracelets set with diamonds and pearls in the drawers; thousands of gold pieces flooding every cupboard. With armfuls of everything, Marite filled the trunks as quickly as she could and buckled them both closed.

Leaving the trunks, Marite stumbled down the hallway and out into the courtyard by the roses where the horse was waiting. The two trunks were saddled onto a carriage which Marite rushed to board, snapping the reins on the horse and racing down the long stone path away from the beast's castle.

When she arrived home, Marite's daughters were overjoyed. They hugged her warmly and told her that the witch hunters had left a week after their mother had left, having taken two women with them.

Marite asked who the women were and Belle replied:

"The midwife and the innkeeper's daughter—the one with the mark on her cheek."

Marite was relieved the hunters had moved away but she sighed regretfully when Belle told her the news. She felt even worse when she told her daughters of the beast and its demand.

The eldest daughters immediately pointed at Belle, declaring that she was the one to demand the rose and she should be the one to pay the price for it. Their mother hushed them and argued that she would be the one to go to the beast when the month was over. But Belle shook her head and replied adamantly, "No, Ma. I shall go to the beast and it will be willingly." At first, her mother wouldn't hear of it but Belle was firm in her vow and Marite reluctantly relented.

The month passed quickly and, soon, Belle was mounting the same horse her mother had. She said good-bye to her sisters and mother before cantering for the forest.

The journey was short and Belle could hardly bear to drop down from the horse as the great castle towered above her, the stone stairs leading to the door more imposing than the forest behind her. After securing the horse in the stables, Belle climbed the stairs and knocked on the hulking wood doors.

There was no reply so she knocked again. This time, the door swung open and she peered around for her host to find the room empty and hauntingly silent.

Moving through the hall, Belle wandered the empty corridors, exploring each room. The first she came across was filled with stunning paintings that she gazed at for hours. The second was an aviary for all manner of tropical birds that flew to her with sweet songs on their beaks. The third held drawers stacked with satin and silk and ribbon to create any clothes she could imagine. In the fourth room was a table laden with a feast. Belle trailed her fingers over the ivory white table cloth and inhaled the rich scents of meats, fruits, berries, sauces and hot loaves. Sitting at one head of the table, Belle stacked a plate full of wonderful foods to wolf hungrily down.

After she had finished, she found a room housing a wide four-poster bed. Undressing, she slipped between the cotton sheets and fell asleep.

That night, she dreamt that she was walking beside a lake, lined with ash trees that dappled sunlight in their leaves, mourning her fate. A princess, more beautiful than anyone she had ever seen, approached her and said, "Belle! You are not so ill-fated as you imagine. In this palace, you shall be rewarded for your sufferings. Every desire will be gratified. My Beauty, try to discover me, no matter the disguise I wear. I need you. In helping me, you could find your own happiness. Pray, be as true-hearted as you are beautiful."

"Princess, what can I do?" Belle begged. "What do you need from me?"

"Be grateful," she answered, "and do not trust too much your eyes. They are more deceptive than they may seem."

Belle was so intrigued in her dream that she was almost resentful when a clock called her name softly twelve times and brought her out of her dreams. She dressed in a gown from the dresser beside her bed and imagined the princess in her mind: she had been beautiful and Belle longed to see her again. Wandering out of her bedroom, Belle pondered the princess's words. Perhaps she was trapped here by the beast, as well. Perhaps she needed Belle to free her.

The second day at the palace and Belle found more splendid rooms filled with splendid things that proved more than she could ever have wished for. Eventually, though, she returned to the gallery of paintings and found a life-size portrait of her princess. There was a serene smile on her lips that hadn't been there in Belle's dream and it made her heart twinge with pain. She vowed to free the princess and left the room.

When it was time for dinner, Belle made her way to the room that held the banquet. Half way through her meal, there was a thump on the floor. She paused. There was another thump. And another. As the thumping neared, she recognised it for footsteps and tensed in fear as the door swung open and revealed the beast. Her mother had described some of the beast's grotesque appearance to her but spared much, she now realised. One of the beast's ears was crinkled and drooping, its snout was scarred with three claw marks and it had a back so hunched it could only lurch towards her when it walked.

"Beast," whispered Belle.

"Belle," the beast replied.

There was a pause and Belle worried that it was time for the beast to eat her or chain her up or throw her to the wolves in the forest.

The beast did none of that. Instead, it asked her how she had been amusing herself in the castle.

Belle replied cheerfully about the rooms she had explored and a faint smile blossomed over the beast's swollen lips. While the brilliantly glaring red of the beast's eyes was unsettling, Belle discovered that the beast was less intimidating than she had thought. Nevertheless, the next thing the beast said was:

"I know I scare you in this form, Belle, but I must ask. Are you happy here? Answer me truthfully and I shall leave you for this evening."

Belle promised that she could never be morose surrounded by such wonderful things and the beast seemed pleased with the answer. Like it promised, the beast left. After finishing her dinner, Belle went to bed and waited impatiently for her dreams to return her the princess.

They did not disappoint.

Except, this time, the princess's voice was more familiar when she spoke. "Ah, Beauty," she greeted, in the grand gardens surrounding the beast's castle, "do you fear me?"

"How possibly could I?" Belle replied, astonished. The princess's face was gentle and her eyes were warm. Belle felt weight lift from her shoulders the moment she saw the princess again. She held no fear for the princess and wondered what had prompted the sudden question.

The serene smile in her painting was absent once more as the princess sighed and looked out across the water of the lake to the castle. “And yet, your heart thudded in fear when I approached you,” the princess continued, “and you could hardly stand to look me in the face.”

Belle frowned in disbelief. “I never feared to look at you,” she argued, “it makes me feel less alone when I see you. I wish you could be with me. Outside of my dreams.”

The princess smiled sadly and downcast her eyes. “I already am.”

Belle’s stay at the castle turned from days into weeks and, all the while, she searched for the princess and the meaning beyond her words. Since the princess’s mysterious message, the only things she had told Belle were: “Look past my disguise. I cannot talk to you when I am with you. I am afraid, Belle. Do not trust appearances: they are seldom what they seem.”

Although she refused to tell Belle any more of where she was, the two of them spoke at length in her dreams. Curled in the soft, damp grass of the brook bank and gazing into the princess’s honeyed brown eyes as her plump brown lips would describe her favourite books in the castle’s library or her favourite horse in the stable or her favourite season to explore the forest. Belle learned her name was Adelaide and had begun to hear the princess’s words when she was awake, remembering the way her coiled brown hair fanned out around the daisies that grew on the bank.

The beast met her each day at dinner and asked her if she was happy at the castle.

That night, the beast did the same. Except, when it asked, instead of answering with her usual cheerful affirmative, Belle broke into a sob. She had been so transfixed with the mysterious princess that she had been ignoring the growing homesickness in her heart.

“I miss my mother,” she sobbed, finally. “My sisters...”

“Your brothers, too?” the beast prompted.

Belle blinked in surprise. She was sure that the beast didn’t know about her brothers. “They left,” she sniffed, wiping her tears and clearing her throat, “when they realised they had property rights and we didn’t.”

The beast averted its gaze and growled. Then, it stood and muttered, “Your mother and your sisters, then. Take this ring and visit them. I trust you to return in two months.”

Belle was amazed. In an overwhelming surge of gratitude, she flung her arms around the beast’s neck and thanked it heartily.

“When you fall asleep, you will wake back at home,” the beast told her, breaking the embrace and shuffling

backwards, “when it is time to return, put the ring on and say: ‘I wish to return to my palace and my beast’.” Belle thanked the beast again before running out of the dining room to her bed and waiting for sleep to take her.

When she awoke, she was in an unfamiliar bed. She called out for her mother and discovered her in a workshop outside of her bedroom.

Marite startled when she saw her daughter but soon rushed over to embrace her. Belle’s sisters appeared from another room and greeted their sister with surprise. Once she had explained her time with the beast, Belle asked about the new house.

“We used the wealth from the beast’s castle to buy the building next to the Baker’s. The building is in his name but we can stay here as long as we like!” Marite told her.

Belle was overjoyed that her family had found such a large house with a workshop for her mother to work in. The first few days back at home settled the homesick longing in Belle’s heart but the days thereafter began to frustrate her sisters, who had grown used to Belle’s absence. Soon, Belle was miserable at home and longed to dream again of the princess.

At the end of the two months, Belle wished a teary good-bye to her mother but felt no remorse about returning to the beast’s castle as she slid the ring onto her finger and whispered:

“I wish to return to my palace and my beast.”

She awoke in her bed and gasped.

It was her own words that finally pieced together the princess’s enigma.

My beast.

Vowing to discover her princess, Belle leaped out of bed and rushed down the corridor, crying, “Princess! Princess! I must find you. My heart does not thud out of fear now. I know it. I know it!” The castle, however, was empty and Belle fell to the floor. “Beast. My beast. You are my beast, my princess.”

Struck with the image of Princess Adelaide’s jet-black hair woven between strands of grass, Belle jumped to her feet and hurtled through the castle to the brook of her dreams. She raced across the gardens and flew across the grass until she skidded to halt by the brook, beside the hulking form of the beast, unmoving on the ground. Tears flooded her eyes as she sank to her knees and tugged on the beast’s shoulders. She could see it now. The crimson of the beast’s eyes was mottled with the honey-brown spots that flecked Adelaide’s eyes; the ebony fur

covering the beast's body was the same shade of her corkscrew curled locks; the scars across the beast's snout were the three freckles that spotted Adelaide's nose; the missing patches of fur on the beast's face marked the dimples that contoured hers.

Belle pressed a hand to the beast's cheek and pressed a kiss to her lips. "Beast," she whispered, glancing between the closed eyes beneath her, "Princess. Adelaide. I love you."

A shimmering light of malachite green burst from the beast the moment she snapped her eyes open and Belle staggered away as the giant body of the beast cracked and shrunk, horns and claws retracting, fur falling away in tufts. Until, finally, Princess Adelaide lay coughing on the ground. Curling over, she cleared her throat and ran her fingers up and down her hairless brown arms with adoration. Then, she glanced up and saw Belle. "Beauty," she murmured.

The two women fell back into the grass together.

Once upon a time, in the richest lands of kings and queens, was a palace rife with jubilation and celebration. A curse had been broken and Queen Adelaide was on the throne once more—beside her, was her wife, Queen Belle.

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